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BUSTING THE BARRICADES:

How Armor Was Employed In the Urban Battle of Seoul

by Captain Matthew H. Fath

As noted in a recent *Army Times* article entitled "Urban Crisis," few armor or mechanized infantry units — and not one active duty armor or mechanized infantry unit — has yet trained or was scheduled to train at the Zussman Village Mounted Urban Combat Training Site at Fort Knox, Kentucky.

This is a startling fact, considering that the facility cost over 15 million dollars to build and is touted as the premier urban warfare training center for armor units.¹ This apparent lack of interest by the heavy force community, coupled with the light infantry's increasing reliance on "precision" urban warfare, is a disturbing trend. By disregarding the likelihood of future battles in urban terrain, many heavy units, with their emphasis on desert or rural warfare, allow the special operations and elite light infantry units to write the Army's future urban warfare doctrine. For example, a cursory reading of doctrinal proposals or combat training center articles demonstrates that the correct training emphasis of conventional U.S. Army units should be on proper room-clearing techniques and well-aimed rifle fire.² Moreover, the focal point for "precision" MOUT adherents seems to be on aggressive light infantry forces, to the neglect of the combined arms team. Disregarding both the very nature of urban warfare and history's past urban battles, "precision" MOUT supporters have wrongly implied that future urban fights will require less firepower.

General Douglas MacArthur once stated that it is the study of military history that brings to light "those fundamental principles, and their combinations and applications, which, in the past, have been productive of success."³ An examination of the Battle of Seoul during September 25-28, 1950, refutes

the "precision" MOUT theory and demands that armor and mechanized leaders claim their rightful place at the table of doctrinal discussions. Specifically, the Battle of Seoul demonstrates that armor, with its ability to survive on the battlefield and produce large, concentrated amounts of firepower, was an integral component of the combined arms team. During X Corps's "Battle of the Barricades," Marine and Army tactics stressed the punching power of tanks as a decisive and necessary complement to the rifleman. Tanks, in the role of mobile assault guns, reinforced the rifle companies with destructive and suppressive fires to overcome the North Korean People's Army's (NKPA) strongpoint defenses. Additionally, they provided commanders flexibility by shifting tanks to decisive points on the battlefield. As a veteran of the fighting in Seoul, Private First Class Lee Berger of E Company, 2d Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, stated, "Thank God we had tanks with us. Without them, we'd still be fighting there."⁴

Given the military, psychological, and political importance of Seoul to both the UN (United Nations) and NKPA forces, it is hardly surprising that the city would become a battleground. Seoul, the capital of South Korea, was also an important logistics node. General MacArthur believed that the recapture of Seoul was an important part of Operation Chromite (The Inchon-Seoul Campaign) and stated:

"By seizing Seoul, I would completely paralyze the enemy's supply system — coming and going. This in turn will paralyze the fighting power of the troops that now face Walker. Without munitions and food they will soon be helpless and disorganized, and can be easily overpowered by our smaller but well supplied forces."⁵

MacArthur also believed that the recapture of Seoul would undermine the morale of the NKPA and boost the morale of the ROK forces. Author Clay Blair in *The Forgotten War: America in Korea, 1950-1953*, noted that MacArthur placed great emphasis on the psychological benefits of capturing Seoul. MacArthur professed that Seoul's capture would shock and demoralize the North Korean government and armed forces.⁶

For the North Koreans, Seoul was the logistical hub for its forces south of the Imjin River, a lifeline of sorts. As author James Stokesbury, in his work *A Short History of the Korean War*, stated, "The vast majority of the support for the Communist offensive, therefore, funneled through the fairly narrow corridor in and around the capital city."⁷

Two important factors in understanding the need for armor support during the Battle of Seoul center on the nature of the city's urban terrain and the NKPA defenses. In 1950, Seoul had a population of nearly two million people. The city proper was surrounded by hill masses, mostly rural villages of huts. However, its core contained modern office buildings, residential structures, and ancient palaces. Many of the buildings were solidly constructed and structurally sound. Wide arterial boulevards crisscrossed the city, and it was these avenues of approach that would become the focal point for NKPA strongpoints.⁸ One such major road was Ma Po Boulevard. General Edwin H. Simmons, then a weapons company commander in the 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, described Ma Po Boulevard as a "solidly built-up street, mostly two- and three-story structures of stucco and masonry construction, and occasional more impressive build-

buildings — churches, hospitals, and so on — often enclosed with a walled compound.”⁹

In charge of the NKPA defense of Seoul was Major General Wol Ki Chan. Chan’s initial plan was to concentrate his forces on the hills surrounding Seoul and in the city itself. However, after the 32d Infantry Regiment of 7th Infantry Division seized South Mountain on the 25th of September, Chan believed that the city was lost and withdrew many of his units. Nevertheless, he left a sizeable force to defend Seoul’s city core, in an effort to delay and attrit X Corps forces. Chan hoped that this delaying action would also allow NKPA units south of Seoul to withdraw north and avoid being smashed between X Corps and Eighth Army.¹⁰

Opposing UN forces were an amalgamation of various NKPA units under the newly formed 31st Rifle Division or Seoul City Regiment, numbering approximately 8,000 to 10,000 men. The 31st Rifle Division consisted of units from the 25th NKPA Separate Infantry Brigade, 18th NKPA Rifle Division, 42d NKPA Tank Regiment, 19th NKPA Anti Tank Regiment, 513th NKPA Artillery Regiment, 10th NKPA Railroad Regiment, and the 36th Battalion, 111th NKPA Security Regiment.¹¹ The NKPA defenders also employed a large majority of Seoul’s inhabitants as forced labor to construct their barricades.¹²

To defend the nucleus of Seoul, the NKPA developed a potentially deadly defensive scheme. On the outer edges of the city core, the NKPA employed ambushes and sniper teams in order to attrit and disrupt Marine or Army attacks. Photojournalist David Douglas Duncan, with A Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, testified to the frustrating effects of these ambushes in his book *This Is War: A Photo-Narrative of the Korean War*. He stated, “Other Reds, armed with rapid fire burp guns and hiding behind the gutter walls along the way, squirted



quick bursts at the steadily pushing Marines — then melted away.”¹³

After the ambushes had taken some toll on the attackers, the NKPA hoped that their series of successive strong-point defenses or barricades would destroy them. Barricades were established every 400 to 600 yards. If the attacker could not be halted, the NKPA’s defensive depth would allow their defenders to break contact, withdraw, and then occupy a supplemental or alternate barricade.¹⁴ The major weakness of the NKPA’s defense was that many strong-points were isolated and lacked mutual support. As author Bevin Alexander explained in his book *Korea: The First War We Lost*, “Thus the Americans were able to reduce each barricade independently with no fear that the enemy could develop a coordinated counterattack or pose any threat to possession of the city.”¹⁵

Despite the NKPA’s lack of an overall coherent defensive plan, at the small unit level each barricade was individually formidable and deadly to the potential attacker. These barricades were essentially fortified islands. As author Robert Tallent, who

was with D Company, 2d Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, stated:

“In actions of this type there can be no flanking of a position — only so many men can get into the fight. The width of the street, available cover and strength of the enemy fire dictate the number of troops that can be brought to bear on any one position... The barricade is a separate battle all to itself.”¹⁶

Each barricade was centered on a street intersection. The entire width of the street was blocked with a wall constructed of rice bags filled with earth. The barricade was generally eight feet high and approximately six feet deep, making it impervious to machine gun or small arms fire. Many barricades were reinforced with various materials such as overturned trolley cars, automobiles, barrels, streetcar rails, or other debris. In front of each barricade were rows of antitank mines. Covering this kill zone were interlocking fires from towed 45mm antitank guns, individual T-34 tanks or SU 76 self-propelled guns, antitank rifles, and Maxim heavy machine guns.¹⁷

Each barricade was also tied into adjacent buildings. NKPA soldiers occu-



pied defensive fighting positions inside the buildings and fired from doors and windows.¹⁸ These positions offered excellent cover and concealment and degraded the attacker's target acquisition. Snipers also fired from rooftops. Staff Sergeant Lee Bergee of E Company, 2d Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, stated that, "It seemed that every building in Seoul housed an enemy sniper."¹⁹ Each barricade was also supported with mortars and artillery fires, which were often registered in front of the enemy barricades. For extra defense against tanks, the NKPA also resorted to suicide detachments armed with satchel charges.²⁰

Against these defenses, the X Corps commander, Major General Edward Almond, ordered General Oliver P. Smith's 1st Marine Division to seize Seoul. Smith planned a multi-pronged advance that was centered on major roads in Seoul, in an effort to capture the city quickly.²¹ Based on the limited intelligence of NKPA defenses in Seoul, the operation was essentially an urban movement to contact. On September 25, the 1st Marine Division began its attack on Seoul. In order to support the 1st Marine Division's at-

tack and isolate the city from the south, the 32d Infantry Regiment of the 7th Infantry Division seized South Mountain and cleared the surrounding urban area.²²

Marine Regimental Combat Team One, consisting of the 1st Marine Regiment and the 2d Korean Marine Corps Battalion, attacked in zone (its "zone of action" approximately one mile to one and half miles wide with a final objective of six miles in depth — the high ground near the northeastern outskirts of Seoul) oriented on the Ma Po Boulevard. In RCT-1's zone were Seoul's main business and hotel section; the main Seoul railroad station; the French, American, and Russian consulates; City Hall; the Duk Soo Palace; and the Museum of Art.²³ To give the reader a flavor of the scope of RCT-1's mission, General Edwin Simmons stated that their attack was analogous to "moving up Pennsylvania Avenue to capture the Capitol, taking Union Station along the way."²⁴

Regimental Combat Team Five, consisting of the 5th Marine Regiment and the 1st Korean Marine Corps Battalion, attacked in zone (its "zone of action"

also approximately one to one and a half miles wide, with a final objective of six miles in depth — the high ground overlooking the Seoul-Uijongbu Road) oriented towards the northwestern part of the city, which included the Government House, Sodaemun Prison, Changdok Palace, and the Royal Gardens. Regimental Combat Team Seven, consisting of the 7th Marine Regiment, the 1st Marine Recon Company, and the 5th Korean Marine Corps Battalion, was originally ordered to protect the division's left flank and seize the high ground astride the Seoul-Kaesong Road to the northwest of Seoul in order to block enemy escape routes.²⁵ However, after Smith realized the intensity of the fighting in Seoul, he reoriented RCT-7's axis to the south down the Kaesong-Seoul highway and ordered them to attack abreast of RCT-1.²⁶

Despite MacArthur's premature pronouncement of the city's liberation on September 26, the seizure of Seoul did not come quickly. After defeating a NKPA armored counterattack during the night of September 25, the Marine forces soon became bogged down in a street-by-street war. As Colonel Lewis "Chesty" Puller, the commander of the

1st Marine Regiment stated, "Progress was agonizingly slow."²⁷ Sometimes, the Marine regiments averaged a total of 1,200 to 2,000 yards a day.²⁸ This was due to the fact that the lethal NKPA traps produced murderous amounts of fire and posed significant challenges for the Marine or Army attackers. They also had the propensity to inflict large numbers of casualties. Private First Class Jack Wright of G Company, 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, remarked that his company nicknamed one intersection "Blood and Bones Corner."²⁹ Army Signal Corps Lieutenant Robert Strickland, who was with the Marines in Seoul, stated:

"The air was whipping with everything from flying stones to big antitank shells... Right after this, we got so much fire of all kinds that I lost count. There was more mortar shells, more antitank stuff, and more small-arms fire, and then it started all over again. I have seen a lot of men get hit in this war and in World War II, but I think I have never seen so many men get hit so fast in such a small area."³⁰

Given the nature of the intense fighting described above, it becomes abundantly clear that the "sugar-coated version" of precision MOUT could not have possibly overcome these defenses.³¹

Instead, in order to breach these barricades and destroy the NKPA defenders, the Marine and Army forces developed a highly effective combined arms team, in which tanks played an indispensable role. Most UN forces quickly discovered that rifle or machine guns lacked the penetrating power and punch to overcome the hardened NKPA barricade defenses. Moreover, only the tank proved to be effective at physically breaching the barricade. It simply blasted it to shreds with its main gun or plowed through it.³²

The typical tactical pattern for the Marines or Army units began with a bombing or strafing of NKPA positions by Marine Corsairs. Next, mortars and artillery suppressed the enemy while a team of infantry and armor moved into support-by-fire positions. Tanks destroyed NKPA machine guns, tanks, and antitank guns, while engineers breached the minefields.

After a breach lane was created, tanks rolled forward and demolished the barricade. Then infantry, following behind the tanks to take advantage of their armor protection, entered buildings and

completed the destruction of the enemy. On the average, this whole process took about an hour per barricade.³³ Staff Sergeant Chester Bair of the Heavy Tank Company, 32d Infantry Regiment, which was often attached to Marine units, praised these tactics. He stated:

"The Marines used tanks very well. They would use the telephone located on the rear of each tank which talked to the commander inside. In this way the Marines acted as our eyes. Buttoned up inside, depending on a periscope, our vision was limited. Working outside in the streets, the Marines tremendously increased our ability to close with the enemy and to direct our firepower."³⁴

The two tanks that were used by UN forces during the Battle of Seoul were the M-26 Pershing and the M4A3 Sherman. The M-26 Pershing was used by the Marine Corps. Its armament was a 90mm main gun and two .30 caliber machine guns. The Army used the M4A3 Sherman. Also, some Marine units received support from the Sherman tank companies of the 7th Infantry Division. The Sherman's armament consisted of a 76mm main gun and three .30 caliber machine guns. In addition to the Pershing and Sherman tanks, other variants, such as flame-thrower tanks and bulldozer tanks, were also used.³⁵

Tanks were often rotated in order for the attacking units to sustain the momentum of the attack and prevent many withdrawing NKPA soldiers from bolstering the defense of the next barricade. Chester Bair stated, "As soon as one had been eliminated, there would be another. After a tank overran three or four of them, another one would replace it.

In this manner each tank could refuel, clean its guns, receive ammo, and allow the crew to work and do maintenance."³⁶ If a tank "rotation" policy was not possible, attackers waited for tanks to rearm and refuel before continuing on to the next barricade fight.³⁷

One hallmark of the tank's effectiveness was its ability to generate large amounts of accurate and deadly firepower in a very short time. During the destruction of one barricade by D Company, 2d Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, Tallent stated that it appeared that the "tank guns went into a rampage."³⁸ Tanks assisting companies from the 1st Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment were also instrumental in de-

stroying NKPA defenses around the railroad station and government compound.³⁹ Often, tanks proved to be the decisive arm when the momentum of attacks began to stall and fire superiority needed to be regained. Duncan observed:

"From behind their barricades they (the NKPA) started spraying endless rounds into the station and its plaza out in front. The Marines burrowed into the shell holes and dared not raise their heads, for the crack of bullets overhead was close and constant and meant for them. Back along the street, other Marines heard the fire, leaned dangerously

"The tanks traded round for round with the heavily-armed, barricaded enemy — and chunks of armor and bits of barricade were blown high into the air."

far out from their own barricades to see how they might relieve their buddies, and had found no answer — when deep, ground-shivering roars took the problem from their shoulders... tanks, those long-overdue tanks, growled up across the railroad tracks, into the plaza — and met the enemy fire head on. The tanks traded round for round with the heavily-armed, barricaded enemy — and chunks of armor and bits of barricade were blown high into the air."⁴⁰

Tanks were also very effective at quickly destroying NKPA heavy weapons and armored vehicles which, left alone, would have cut advancing infantrymen to pieces. During a fight near Duksoo Palace, Lieutenant Bryan J. Cummings's M-26 Pershing destroyed two NKPA SU-76s and allowed the Marines to seize the enemy barricade.⁴¹ Blair's Sherman crew also destroyed a NKPA T-34 in a battle in the street, "ripping their turret completely off" with one round.⁴²

Attacks that were launched without tank support often ended in failure. In fact, many of these units had to be rescued by tanks; the presence of a few tanks often favorably shifted the tide of the battle towards the UN side. For example, on September 26, a platoon

from C Company, 32d Infantry Regiment encountered a NKPA defense in vicinity of the Seoul City Racetrack. Suffering heavy casualties within seconds and lacking any tank support, the platoon established a hasty defense and began fighting for their lives. The platoon just simply did not have enough firepower to overcome the NKPA defenses. The platoon leader, Lieutenant James Mortrude, wisely requested assistance from some tanks that he saw in an adjacent sector. As author Shelby Stanton described in his book, *Ten Corps in Korea, 1950*:

"He (Lieutenant Mortrude) spotted a trio of three tanks clanking forward to their assistance, and dashed 25 yards through withering enemy fire to reach them before more casualties were inflicted on his platoon. Grabbing the external interphone system phone on the rear of the "buttoned-up" lead tank, he yelled directions to commence firing immediately into the enemy-held roadway. The tanks smothered the road berm in geysers of blackened earth as the uninjured and walking wounded retreated to safety."⁴³

The initial advance by D Company, 2d Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment is another vignette that demonstrates the vital need for tank support during the urban fight at Seoul. Moving to conduct link-up with elements of the 5th Marine Regiment, D Company was punished by NKPA defenses near the Arch of Independence, suffering heavy casualties within minutes. D Company was soon surrounded by NKPA counterattacks and had to establish a perimeter defense and wait for support. The next morning, tanks smashed through the enemy's defenses and liberated the lost company.⁴⁴

The liberation of Seoul actually occurred on September 28, when fittingly, a flame-thrower tank destroyed that last real NKPA defense near Kwang Who Moon Circle.⁴⁵ Seoul was ripped from the hands of the NKPA at a high cost. For example, the 1st Marine Division lost 121 killed in action and 589 wounded. NKPA casualties were estimated at 4,284 dead or wounded.⁴⁶ U.S. tanks proved to be quite resilient. Not one tank was destroyed by an NKPA tank but several were destroyed by suicide detachments or mines.⁴⁷

The use of armor during the Battle of Seoul provides the modern military leader with key insights on the possibilities of future urban warfare and the

need to train units to meet this challenge. The Marine and Army experience in Seoul demonstrates that armor plays a critical role in destroying a resolute enemy in urban battles. Armor has the ability to rapidly destroy enemy strongpoints and create breach holes for the infantry assault, while using its armor protection to survive on the battlefield.

Like the Marines and the Army at Seoul, successful future MOUT operations should be conducted with combined arms teams, with armor or infantry fighting vehicles playing a requisite role. The current fad of believing that infantry alone, employing "discriminatory" rifle fire and hostage rescue tactics, can overcome an urban defense may well be a recipe for disaster. Precision MOUT techniques, while admirable and alluring in its concept of minimizing noncombatant casualties and collateral damage, does not pass the test of history.

Notes

¹Sean D. Naylor, "Urban Crisis," *Army Times*, 20 November 2000, [on-line].

²The definition of precision MOUT can be found in the Department of the Army *Field Manual 90-10-1, An Infantryman's Guide to Combat in Built-Up Areas* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1993).

³John E. Jessup and Robert W. Coakley, *A Guide to the Study and Use of Military History* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1998), 38.

⁴Donald Knox, *The Korean War, Pusan to Chosin: An Oral History* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 293.

⁵William T. James, "From Siege to Surgical: The Evolution of Urban Combat from World War II to the Present and Its Effect on Current Doctrine," (M.M.A.S. thesis, United States Army Command and General Staff College, 1998), 27.

⁶Clay Blair, *The Forgotten War: America in Korea, 1950-1953* (New York: Times Books, 1987), 231-232.

⁷James L. Stokesbury, *A Short History of the Korean War* (New York: William Morrow, 1988), 66.

⁸Roy E. Appleman, *United States Army in the Korean War: South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1961), 531; Knox, 288; James, 27-28.

⁹Edwin H. Simmons, "The Battle For Seoul," address to the U.S. Marine Corps Amphibious Warfare School, 15 March 1985, [on-line], <http://www.geocities.com/pentagon/6453/seoul.html>, accessed 14 September 2000.

¹⁰G.W. Smith, "The Blinding Sand of MacArthur's Hourglass: The Race to Seoul," *Marine*

Corps Gazette (September 2000), [on-line], accessed 7 Sep 2000; Robert E. Everson, "Standing at the Gates of the City: Operational Level Actions and Urban Warfare," (M.M.A.S. thesis, School of Advanced Military Studies, United States Army Command and General Staff College, 1995), available from the Center for Army Lessons Learned Database (Public Access), <https://calldbpub.leavenworth.army.mil/call.html>, accessed 8 September 2000; Bevin Alexander, *Korea: The First War We Lost* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1986), 214; James, 29.

¹¹Lynn Montross and Nicholas A. Canzona, *United States Marine Corps Operations in Korea, 1950-1953, Volume II: The Inchon-Seoul Operation* (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, United States Marine Corps, 1955), 325-326.

¹²Shelby L. Stanton, *Ten Corps in Korea, 1950* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1996), 106.

¹³David D. Duncan, *This Is War! A Photographic Narrative of the Korean War* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1990).

¹⁴Robert Tallent, "Street Fight in Seoul," *The Leathernecks: An Informal History of the U.S. Marine Corps* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1963), 240-241.

¹⁵Alexander, 218.

¹⁶Tallent, 240.

¹⁷Robert D. Heinl, Jr., *Victory at High Tide: The Inchon-Seoul Campaign* (New York: J.B. Lippincott, 1968), 229; Andrew C. Geer, *The New Breed: The Story of the U.S. Marines in Korea* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952), 171; Simmons; Tallent, 240-241; Montross and Canzona, 271-272; Knox, 289.

¹⁸Alexander, 215-216.

¹⁹Knox, 289.

²⁰Montross and Canzona, 272.

²¹Anthony Harrigan, "Combat in Cities," *Military Review* 46, No. 2, (May 1966): 29; Montross and Canzona, 255-256.

²²Montross and Canzona, 273-274.

²³*Ibid.*, 255-256; Appleman, 531.

²⁴Simmons.

²⁵Montross and Canzona, 255-256; Appleman, 531.

²⁶Montross and Canzona, 264.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 272.

²⁸Montross and Canzona, 273; Heinl, 242.

²⁹Knox, 292.

³⁰Stanton, 108-109.

³¹George Mordica, "Urban Combat: It's A Dirty Business, But Someone Has to Do It," Center for Army Lessons Learned Newsletter — Urban Combat Operations: Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures, November 1999, No. 99-16, 1-2. Mordica coins the term "sugar-coated," when referring to precision or surgical MOUT.

³²Tallent, 244; Heinl, 229-230.

Continued on Page 35

SEOUL from Page 29

³³Heinl, 229-230; Alexander, 216; Appleman, 535.

³⁴Knox, 294.

³⁵Birchard L. Kortegaard, "Korean War: Tanks and Fighting Vehicles," <http://rt66.com/~korteng/SmallArms/tanks.htm>, accessed on 15 November 2000; Appleman, 535.

³⁶Knox, 293.

³⁷Heinl, 242.

³⁸Tallent, 243.

³⁹Montross and Canzona, 279.

⁴⁰Duncan.

⁴¹Montross and Canzona, 278; Heinl, 245.

⁴²Knox, 294.

⁴³Stanton, 106-107.

⁴⁴Appleman, 534-535; James, 32.

⁴⁵Appleman, 535.

⁴⁶James, 35.

⁴⁷Appleman, 540.

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